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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000365

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS AND DRL -- RANDALL BRANDT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2018  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#)  
SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH ALLOWED TO PROCEED WITH "ALLAH"  
CHALLENGE

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Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, REASON 1.4 (B AND D).

11. (C) Summary: Malaysia's Catholic Church, challenging a government ban on use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims, has won its first round in court on May 5. Church contacts told us the government was shocked by the strong reaction of the Catholic Church against the ban of "Allah," given that the GOM and the Church had quietly settled previous disputes out of the public arena. The public drawing of a line by the Catholic Church may mark a decision by Church leaders to attempt to push back against perceived politicization of Islam at the expense of wider civil society. In comments to the Ambassador, the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur was not optimistic regarding the eventual outcome of the "Allah" case. End Summary.

Challenge in court  
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12. (SBU) The Catholic Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur has won the right to challenge the government's ban on the use of "Allah" by non-Muslims. On February 12, the Ministry of Internal Security issued an order to the Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur to stop using the word "Allah" in the Catholic weekly, The Herald. The High Court's May 5 decision found cause for a judicial review of government's ban, issued under the Ministry of Internal Security's publishing guidelines. The court also granted the Herald the right to continue using "Allah" until a final judicial decision. The weekly newspaper carries reports about the Catholic community in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. It also frequently publishes articles critical of government policies, especially those dealing with human rights, migrant workers, and religious freedom. Most recently in March, the paper published articles advising Malaysians to "vote their conscience," seen as an indirect endorsement of the opposition in the March 8 election. The Herald wants the courts to declare null and void the ban on non-Muslims using "Allah," and to affirm that the word "Allah" is not exclusive to the religion of Islam.

Banned from using the word "Allah"  
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13. (U) According to the former Minister in the Prime Minister Department, Abdullah Mohamad Zain, only Muslims can use "Allah," otherwise Muslims may become "confused." Deputy Internal Security Minister Johari Baharum echoed Zain's sentiments by saying only Muslims can use "Allah" as it is a "Muslim word." Dr. Syed Ali Tawfik, Executive Director of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (AKIM), a government institute, argued that the Bible does not contain a specific name for God whereas the Quran uses Allah. This,

he stated, clearly shows that God in Islam and God in Christianity are different. He claimed the Catholic plaintiff, the Herald's editor, did not represent the Catholic community, but instead intended to create confusion and provoke Muslims.

¶4. (U) In its application for judicial review, the Catholic Church argued that Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which covers religious freedom, protects the Church's use of "Allah." The Church's legal counsel also pointed out that "Allah" was in use centuries before Islam's establishment. In 2007, GOM attempted to deny re-issuance of the Herald's publishing license for using "Allah" but granted the permit unconditionally following vocal protests from the Catholic community. In February the GOM again tried to reinstitute the ban as a condition for the Herald's license renewal.

¶5. (C) Father Lawrence, editor of the Herald, told us the Government was shocked by the vocal and strong reaction of the Church against the ban of "Allah" and the Church's decision to pursue a court decision. The GOM and the Church had quietly settled previous disputes out of the public arena. Following the May 5 initial ruling, the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur confided to the Ambassador that he was not optimistic the courts would decide in favor of the Church.

¶6. (C) Comment: Senior Church leaders, as well as parish priests, voiced their concerns to us regarding their perceptions of a growing encroachment of Islam on Malaysia's wider civil society. The public drawing of a line by the Catholic Church may mark a decision by Church leaders to attempt to push back against the gradual politicization of Islam within Malaysia. Thus far, the Herald's case has not drawn much attention from Malaysia's Muslim community, but this could change as the Catholic Church pursues the matter

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further in court.  
KEITH